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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS WORKERS FACE VISA DENIALS

REF: A. JERUSALEM 4511

[1](#)B. JERUSALEM 4472

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: American religious workers from Christian organizations in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain visas from the Government of Israel (GOI). Of those issued visas, many receive only a 3-month tourist visa or a one-year humanitarian worker's visa. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (SBU) American religious workers, representing a variety of Christian denominations, are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain or renew visas to work in Jerusalem, Gaza or the West Bank, a problem shared with Palestinian-Americans from all aspects of society. Many are faced with leaving the country every three months because they were issued only a tourist visa, and some of those who leave are denied re-entry or given only one-week visas. In general, these workers have employment contracts with recognized churches and religious organizations.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Foreign Christian religious workers in Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank comprise four broad categories: staff of churches recognized by Jordan prior to the 1967 war; staff of churches or religious organizations defined by the GOI as "evangelical"; staff of churches not defined as "evangelical" and not recognized prior to 1967; and volunteers. The second category of foreign religious workers often register as humanitarian NGO staff.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Americans working for churches that were recognized by Jordan before 1967 are eligible to apply for a one-year renewable religious visa. These churches include all of the Orthodox churches, such as the Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox, as well as Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Mennonites and Quakers.

[1](#)5. (SBU) A second category includes organizations defined by the GOI as "evangelical." According to Hanan Nasrallah, Senior Administrative Officer with Catholic Relief Services, these organizations include the U.S. based NGO's World Vision and Catholic Relief Services (CRS). They must register as humanitarian NGOs rather than as religious organizations regardless of whether they were recognized prior to 1967. She said staff may apply for one-year NGO visas with this registration. (Note: A 1977 Israeli law prohibits any person from offering or receiving material benefits as an inducement to conversion or from proselytizing to minors. End note.) According to Rev. Mark Brown, the regional representative for Lutheran World Federation, both World Vision and CRS have recently been subjected to a five-year limit on renewals to these visas, and Nasrallah confirmed that one CRS employee

had recently been denied renewal of his visa.

¶16. (SBU) Americans working for churches and religious organizations that are neither identified by the GOI as evangelic nor were recognized by Jordan prior to 1967, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists, are not eligible for any type of work visa, according to Dr. Cathy Nichols, a member of mission personnel with Sabeel, the Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. Instead, Nichols said, these Americans receive single-entry, three-month tourist visas and must leave the country every three months and risk not being readmitted, regardless of their employment contracts. (Note: Those in this category who register with the Ministry of Social Affairs are theoretically allowed to convert their tourist visas to work visas once they are in country, but are rarely allowed to do so. End note.) Nichols has worked with Sabeel for the past five years, entering and leaving every three months on a tourist visa. (Note: Nichols is married to an Israeli and could receive legal permanent status here, but would then be prohibited from working in the West Bank. End note.)

¶17. (SBU) Volunteers receive a one-time option of a six-month volunteer visa and then are prohibited from ever volunteering again. Nichols said most churches advise their volunteers not to say they are volunteers when they enter the country.

¶18. (SBU) ConGen Jerusalem has received various reports of American religious workers being denied even the types of visas they are eligible. Last month, two representatives to Jerusalem for the American Friends Service Committee (the Quakers), who are permitted to apply for religious visas, were given one-week visas despite their stated intention of working several years in Jerusalem. An employee with a two-year contract to Global Ministries similarly received only a one-week visa rather than a three-month tourist visa. Brown said that while he receives the one-year religious visa with multiple entries, his wife and children are given single-entry visas, meaning they must reapply and pay each time they leave the country and return. The associate pastor of Christmas Church in Bethlehem was recently denied a visa altogether, and the representative for the Presbyterians in Bethlehem rents space from CRS in order to obtain a one-year humanitarian NGO work visa under CRS auspices.

¶19. (SBU) Note: The USG issues to religious workers from Israel, the West Bank and Gaza R1 visas, which are valid for five years and multiple entries and may be renewed. Dependents of those on R1 visas receive an R2 visa, which is also renewable and valid for five years with multiple entries. The refusal rate for such visas is extremely low, with ConGen Jerusalem issuing 96 of the 102 R1 visas applied for in 2005 and 104 of the 108 applied for so far in 2006. End note.

¶10. (SBU) Post is requesting that all Americans who have been denied or given limited entry into the country register with the ConGen so that information can be shared with the Department and Embassy Tel Aviv.

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